

ANIMALS - WHALE

## Whale May Have Been Victim of Cargo Ship

New England Aquarium Senior Biologist Belinda Rubinstein said this week that the humpback whale which washed ashore here last week, appears to have died of internal injuries caused by blunt trauma.

Teams from the New England Aquarium, National Marine Fisheries, and Center for Coastal Studies, were among the specialists who performed a necropsy last Wednesday on the carcass of the two-year old 20-ton humpback whale towed to a site away from onlookers at the High Pines section of

Duxbury Beach.

The whale washed ashore the morning of Oct. 1 on the north end of Duxbury Beach.

"The Center for Coastal Studies based in Provincetown catalogues individual humpback whales and identified this one as a two year old they called 'Pitfall' based on a birthmark on the underside of the fluke," said Rubinstein.

Based on the level of decomposition of the internal organs, she said the whale was dead for at least a week. The 37-foot mammal was consid-

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ered unusually large for a two year old. Humpbacks can grow to as large as 55 feet.

"We saw evidence of a broken jaw, different skull fractures and a lot of muscle bruising. Because it was very decomposed inside we couldn't decipher some of the major organs," she said.

Wearing rubber suits and gloves the team undertook the messy job, peeling back the flesh and removing the bones with the assistance of large knives and heavy equipment including chains and bulldozers. The skeleton will be reassembled for marine studies. Samples were taken and the remaining carcass was buried in a trench at High Pines.

"We are grateful to the Duxbury Beach Reservation for authorizing relocation of the carcass so we could perform the necropsy in an isolated area. We aren't always as lucky in some other towns," she said.

Harbormaster Don Beers said the town is lucky that the private Duxbury Beach Reservation owns the beach because they were able to act expeditiously and hire someone to remove the deteriorating carcass for health and scientific reasons. "They jumped right in and made a decision. In many other towns, the carcass is disposed of without concern for the scientific aspect," he said.

Rubinstein said that about a half dozen whales wash ashore each year in the New England area. Usually a necropsy takes about two days, but this one



A necropsy performed on his two year old 37-foot humpback whale indicated the 20-ton mammal died from blunt trauma. Here the carcass is turned over at the north end of Duxbury Beach before it was towed to the lower beach area of High Pines.

was finished in about four hours due to the decomposition of the mammal.

Humpbacks are considered endangered she said. Some have been known to live to be 50 years old.

Rubinstein said that information retrieved from the necropsy will be shared with the National Marine Fisheries Institute which assists in legislative efforts involving marine life.

She speculated the whale could have been hit by a cargo ship but could not confirm the fact other than it experienced a massive blunt trauma.

Unlike in countries like Japan and Norway, whales are not hunted and blubber and byproducts are not sold in the U.S. due to the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Though the necropsy area was restricted from the public there were representatives there from many marine agencies including the NE Aquarium, Center for Coastal Studies, Whale Center of New England based in Gloucester, US Fish and

Wildlife, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute and some Triton High School students whose science teacher is associated with the Fish and Wildlife Agency.

Rubinstein divides her time between NE Aquarium headquarters in Boston and the NE Aquarium Marine Mammal Rehabilitation facility located on the grounds of Battelle Ocean Sciences Laboratories in Duxbury.